

A Lesson in Traditional Irish Fiddle Bowing with Caoimhin O' Raghallaigh

By Joe Carr

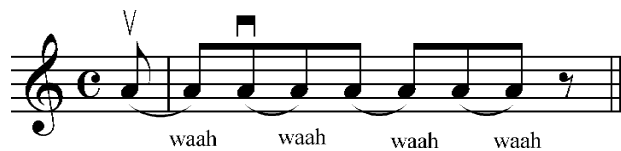
Some months ago, my good friend and Alaskan Irish fiddler Richard Gelardin sent me a copy of a lesson he had with Caoimhin O' Raghallaigh. Caoimhin may be best known for his fiddling on the 2003 ACM release *Kitty Lie Over* with piper Mick O'Brien. Caoimhin was featured in an interview with Brenden Taaffe in the Spring 2005 issue of *Fiddler* [Vol.12, No.1]. The following is an excerpt from the lesson used with Caoimhin's permission. Through numerous emails, Caoimhin amplified the lesson.

This lesson is a great short nugget of information. It is concise, clear and contains examples that can be studied over and over again. It presents a simple concept that takes great dedication to master. Gelardin comments: "[Here is a] great example of this 'stereotypical' (common) bowing style not done by many Irish players in the USA. It is a great thing to learn very well and then use as a 'jumping off' spring board for whatever a fiddler wants to do, long after lots of listening to the great old geezers and young arch traditionalists." Caoimhin's words follow:

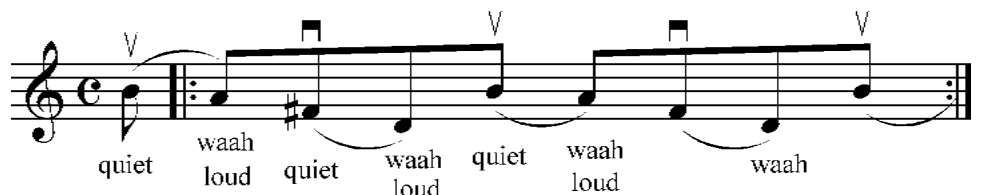
Basic Bowing: The idea is to slur into the beat. The most basic form consists of two notes per bow with the beat falling on the second note. De-DOM where DOM is the beat. This gives a much subtler emphasis than using a new bow for each beat. You have to compensate for the resulting lack of emphasis by using increased bow speed/pressure to emphasize the beat. Using increased bow speed/pressure in the middle of the bow gives a De-DOM sound, or a WAAAH in the middle of the bow. So: [from "Rolling In The Ryegrass"]



On a single bow play two A's, articulating the second with a WAAAH. This is the basic bowing. The sound of a single bow is "quiet-LOUD" — De DOM.



If you are practicing this, try and make it as obvious and extreme as possible. Do the first half of the bow as quietly as you can possibly play it and then the second half as loud as you can possibly play it. It can be used as subtly or as brutally as you want... and it just gives it swing. It's everywhere. Even in its most subtle form, it pretty much happens everywhere. A simple beat from the notes — quiet - LOUD - quiet - LOUD - Upbow -Downbow. In a tune:



“...This pattern is fundamental to every single one of those great Munster fiddle players, including Clare fiddlers Bobby Casey, Paddy Canny, Kerry fiddlers Pdraig O’Keeffe, Denis Murphy, Paddy Cronin...”

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Everything in the first part of “Rolling in the Ryegrass” is using this very basic pattern of bowing: two notes per bow, with the emphasis falling on the second note — the slur crosses the barline. Of course, this is only a basic pattern, an exercise — you would of course vary it. If you don’t it will just sound boring. But it is a useful exercise, and for many people, counter-intuitive, and deceptively difficult! Listen to Denis Murphy playing “The Piper’s Despair” for an illustration of how bouncy and seamless this bowing can sound.

Caoimhin continues via email:

Here’s how I might bow the second part, It’s more complex-looking than the first part — but the main point to note is that I *always* seem to slur into the main beats, i.e. the first and fifth quavers of each bar. The secondary beats, i.e. third and seventh quavers, have more room for negotiation — sometimes slur in / sometimes new bow — but the main beats practically always get emphasized with a slur and that WAAAAH of bow speed/pressure. In its most extreme form this style gives an unbelievably bouncy rhythm, typical of Sliabh Luachra players Paddy Cronin (early years) and Denis Murphy. A

quick glance at David Lyth’s book *Bowing Styles in Irish Fiddle Playing*, Vol 2, where he has transcribed the bowing patterns of the great Munster fiddle players, shows this pattern is fundamental to every single one of those great Munster fiddle players, including Clare fiddlers Bobby Casey and Paddy Canny, Kerry fiddlers Pdraig O’Keeffe, Denis Murphy, and Paddy Cronin, etc. It’s fascinating to look at a page and run your eye down along all the barlines and see the slurs crossing a great number of those barlines! But David Lyth didn’t point out that you *need* the WAAAAH — otherwise that bowing pattern gives no life whatsoever. But with the WAAAAH, it’s the most bouncy style possible!!!!

[Joe Carr teaches bluegrass, western swing, and Irish music in the Commercial Music program at South Plains College in Levelland, Texas. He has developed and appeared in over thirty instructional music videos for Mel Bay Publications and Texas Music & Video. He writes regular columns for Flatpicking Guitar Magazine and Mandolin Magazine. Joe can be seen and heard at www.acousticmusician.com/JoeCarr.html]

Rolling in the Ryegrass

